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SOUND HACKING: FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON NOISE AND NONCOMMUNICATION

DOCUMENTATION, NONMUSIC NOISE, NON-ART, NON-COMMUNICATION

We have become so accustomed to violence through entertainment that transgression itself has become merely another capitalist performance. How then do we elevate art, how can it be a reaction to the Other instead of its medium? How must we act when yesterday's transgressions are today's commodities? – Andreas Burckhardtⁱ

Sound

When we consider the topic of noise, as an aesthetic mode aligned with moments bound up in the emergence or production of new subjective processes, we are taking into consideration an assemblage built from two primary parts. The first of these is the questions of the vibrational infrastructure of the noise itself: how is the noise produced, with what intensity or solemnity, how audible is the noise, how is it directed, from what distance is the noise traveling, how does the architecture impact the noise, how do the bodies in the proximity of the noise, be it those catalyzing it or those receiving it, react? So on and so forth. The vibrational infrastructure of noise is at once a matter of the noise's sonic dimension, as well as the affective response to it. The second are the points of cultural expression, a tapestry woven from but not limited to lifestyles, politics of class and sexuality, experience, subjective environments, and degrees of accessibility.

Neither the vibrational infrastructure or the points of cultural expression can be cleaved apart from one another; each is intricately woven together. We could never pose, nor should we desire to pose, an argument in which we strive to answer which came first: noisy aesthetics as a sonic force, or the cultural war machines. When the Italian Futurists began feverishly penning their odes to frantic speeds of technology ("we jumped, hearing the mighty noise of the double-decker trams," their opening manifesto readsⁱⁱ), Francesco Pratella and Luigi Russolo praised the howls of the city, the most primitive of percussive instruments, free verse, and end of the ballad as an instrument of revolution that would come together from preexisting elements. The Dadaists, having both succeeded and dethroned the Futurists, filled the walls of the Cabaret Voltaire with an "indefinable intoxication,"ⁱⁱⁱ a generation of the sonic, as a scream of revolt against stale bourgeois stagnation. The same goes for the punk rockers, be it the nihilists of New

York City or the post-Situationist leftists in Britain.

Digging into this noisy assemblage will reveal an extensive archive of affective responses. We shall not list them in full, instead touching in passing on two of them. The first affective register is dread. Noise generates unease; it clouds the sonic environment with its own fragmenting excesses and overrides directives of the communication channel. In the presence of a particularly visceral noise experience, one could even feel the immediacy of danger: Brechtian theater collapses away in the face of explosion and chaos's specter. Dread, however, is never a sensation of immediacy. It is a feeling of something that is impending, like a ghostly manifestation of some near future event hovering over the now like a cloud. Dread allows us to project forward into this future, as it is the affect of anticipation being folded into the now. It is abstract, beyond words, but it blankets the whole of the body.

The second register is, paradoxically, the affect of opening. Opening is the sensation of virtuality; like dread, it is abstract in that it is formless and exists along a line where language breaks apart. Opening is the mark of the horizon of possibilities. Energetic and affirmative, opening speaks of things that can be done, a rousing to action. In the noisy continuum, these two registers often coexist in a symbiosis that appears as contradiction, but it is in fact this very non-synthesis that lends agency. While the Futurists ran the lines of speed straight into the maelstrom of fascism, they were undoubtedly, in the words of Kodwo Eshun, "the first media theorists of the twentieth century,"^{iv} capable of tapping into the dread of the ambiance of the technologically-mediated pre-World War I European society and mapping out the coming dissonance. And when the war finally broke across the landscape, it was "inside the cabaret" that the Dadaists "abandoned the need for justifications; then like lovers seeking a way out of an illicit affair all of them contrived endless escapes the next morning, and surrendered again by sundown."^v Speed and war was their reality, conflict and chaos was their art. The horizon was unfolding at the cracks, and a noisy schizophrenia pointed towards that beyond.

Freud himself indeed spoke of the link between his "discovery" of the death instinct and World War I, which remains the model for capitalist war. More generally, the death instinct celebrates the wedding of psychoanalysis and capitalism; their engagement had been full of hesitation... Absorbed, diffuse, immanent death is the condition formed by the signifier in capitalism, the empty locus that is everywhere displaced in order to block the schizophrenic escapes and place restraints on the flights.^{vi}

Everywhere in noise is a muted sort of nostalgia. As the presence of dread and opening indicates (not to mention the self-proclaimed name of those early media theorists!) noise has a certain futurism imbedded within it. Unlike the 'signifier in capitalism' that impedes fluctuation and rebounds the spiraling movements of deterritorialization, it rushes onward in the places beyond now by looking towards immanence. At the same time, the noise continuum betrays a certain conscious nostalgia. It has continually looked backwards at its predecessors, cataloged its influences, but it has never constructed a lineage of itself. Lineage itself is an implication of debt owed; it is much better to approach the continuum from the perspective of the rhizome. Pick a spot to start, and radiate outwards. Follow the branches, the splinters and eruptions, finding no end and no beginning. One could pick the point when noise collides with rhythm in the form of dub: follow its chains down into the multiplicity that Steve Goodman refers to as 'global ghettech,' a "radically synthetic counter to 'world music' that connects together the mutant strains of post-hip-hop, electronic dance music... from kwaito to reggaeton, to cumbia, to dancehall, to crunk, to grime, to baile funk, and others."^{vii} Or one could follow these chains into certain modes of krautrock and post-punk. In another instance, we could start from Futurism and the transition to Dada, and then Neo-Dada and Fluxus, to Downtown Music, into punk and then post-punk and industrial. We need not limit ourselves to musical forms solely – what of the binds that move from Dada to Surrealism to Situationism, and from there to Germany's Kommune I? Krautrock, particularly Amon Duul, can be found here – and we recombine again.

From this perspective the rhizome of the noisy continuum appears as a contagion (we should not be surprised, then, that dub has been described as just that), a force blossoming at so many ruptures, not as a motor of action but something to be invoked, channeled in one form or another, and injected into the relays of cultural, political, and musical networks. That it becomes enfolded, at so many junctures, into commodity-form is countered by the fact that it appears to be perpetually pushing onward, evading capture by changing its mold despite the encompassing of differences across the terrain of the market, driven by its own delirious rhizomatics. The image of the rhizome has come to stand in for infinite circuits of communication in an ever-expanding space. Such language is precisely that of Empire, with its drive not own towards limitless commodification but also connectability. The rhizomatics of the noise contagion, by contrast, is a negative force that jams communication, impedes signals, and the markets the environment for which it intervenes for a simultaneous destruction and evolution. Hence the presence of the affective registers of dread and opening: dissolution and recombination are precisely the reasons noise is invoked.

Communication is always a bringing together of a this with a that. Each is connected to another that, and each to another this. There's no beginning or end, and there is always an excess or lack to any particular communication, a more-than or less-than. But for there to be connections there have to be disconnections – excommunication. Something or someone is excluded, be it heresy or noise or spam.^{viii}

Fury

In "Excess, Machine, Culture," I hoped to chart three inseparable dimensions in noise aesthetics: noise as mutation (or more

properly, the catalyst for mutation), as otherworldly, and as noncommunication. The first two of these dimensions are bound the affective registers of dread and opening: it is the otherworldly that is so often a provocation of dread, the internal sensation produced when one encounters a great unknown before them. By detaching dread from the significations that come with it, we can realize a point in which dread need not be an invocation of death: pragmatically and experimentally exorcised, it can be coupled to opening, that is, mutation, the transformation from one state to another. Opening is affect, but mutation is the force that opening anticipates.

The dimension of noncommunication will be familiar to readers of Deleuze. It exists in a tactical register through his musings on the creation of “vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers” to slip between the cracks of the Control Society.^{ix} A vacuole, in the biological sciences, is an organelle, a subunit existing at the cellular level, that exists within a membrane that lacks a universal form, shifting its composition to reflect the dimensions of the cell that it exists within. The term reappears with frequency elsewhere in Deleuze’s oeuvre; as far back as *Anti-Oedipus*, we find the vacuole appearing in conjunction with and as the organizational logic of lack, a “deliberate creation” of the “dominant class” to ensure the functionality of the market economy.^x Deleuze and Guattari go to great lengths to detach desire from lack (“Desire does not lack anything,” they write; “it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject.”^{xi}) Nick Land described *Anti-Oedipus* as an “engineering manual... a package of software implements for hacking into the machinic unconsciousness, opening invasion channels.”^{xii} Perhaps, but the work is of its time – the schizoanalysis it speaks of takes as its target a specific formation of capitalism that is dominated by disciplinary apparatuses and machines. The abstract machine had yet to develop its engine powered by communication. The turn to vacuoles of noncommunication is a remarkable reversal of these earlier positions by looking to a specific generation of lack as a key to revolutionary action. Praxis in *Anti-Oedipus* is crafted by the accelerationist image of *overflowing*; by the '90s, it is built through the image of breakage, disjunction, and interruption.^{xiii} Yet here we still persist in evading essentialist binaries: at the moment we establish breakdowns in the communication channels (or in the parlance of information theory, noise), we establish a lack that is also in excess of the system as it is something beyond it, that can’t be contained. It becomes a voice or a force from an outside where the dividing lines of “more than” and “less than” cannot be contained within themselves – the otherworldly.

The specter of the otherworld haunts media history and theory. More often than not it takes the position of the supernatural or the spiritual; from the violence of media portrayed in J-horror or the *X-Files*, to the (mis)use of communication technology by paranormal investigators to probe the unknown, to the Spiritualist’s utilization of mirrors and radios to communicate with the dead. Beyond these examples, we can see how the ability to uncouple communication from proximity has, historically, been associated with the mysterious and the bizarre: Olivier Grau has provided a series of examples, such as Athanasius Kircher’s proposals for a gigantic cylindrical mirror that would allow him to depict the ascension of Christ amongst the clouds, or Agrippa of Nettesheim’s own insistence that transmitting messages via mirrors could remove any question of distance from the occasion.^{xiv} Such reflections and ruminations, a snaking chain stretching back through Gnosticism as beyond, and onward through Theosophy and the parapsychologists of today, are for Grau a negative to be warded away; they are an “irresponsible escapism into irrational and religious realms.”^{xv} But perhaps Grau’s dismissal is wrong, and that there is much to learn from the irrational and the impulsive; after all, the division between irrational and rational, impulsive and plotted, secular and sacred is fraught with ruptures and strange allegiances, where one explodes into the filiation of the other and shifts it accordingly. Instead of condemning the desire to explore the otherworldly as escapism, we may do well to approach rationality from the perspective of Henri Lefebvre, who saw this force as one that has withered away the capacity for experience and intensity. “The mysterious, the sacred and the diabolical, magic ritual, the mystical – at first these things were lived with intensity.”^{xvi} He notes that while the rationality of what was then the industrial society of high discipline eliminated these elements, they persisted through modernity in subdued, commodified forms: talismans as toys, the mysterious as the strange, the bizarre little more than a “stimulant” to spice up the everyday. But the mysterious, the sacred, and the profane holds sway for him, for Lefebvre’s flight to the outer realms of Marxism put him into orbit with the noisy avant-gardes of modernity – the Dadaists, the Surrealists, decadent poetry and ultimately, all the heretical sects, movements, notions, and occulted sensations that fed these things and polluted bourgeois Enlightenment like a miasma.

For Lefebvre, like Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, the machine of industrial produced an enclosure around everyday life which detached the individual and the group from a lived experience of authenticity (what these individuals analyzed was attacked by the countercultures of their time, with the resurrection of the shamanic and the esoteric coexisting alongside the more directed political aspirations of civil rights, the anti-war movement, and the greater hopes for a different age). In this enclosure, the thirst for otherness is cleared with the wine of the marketplace. The Red Army Faction would express this with a great clarity, despite the great unfortunate nature of their response: “The system in the metropole has managed to drag the masses so far down into their own dirt that they seem to have largely lost any sense of the oppressive and exploitative nature of their situation, of their situation as objects of the imperialist system. So that for a car, a pair of jeans, life insurance, and a loan, they will easily accept any outrage on the part of the system. In fact, they can no longer imagine or wish for anything beyond a car, a vacation, and a tiled bathroom.”^{xvii} Otherworldly = Other = Alterity, a vanishing point, a horizon that crumbled away. Without alterity, there cannot be any mutation or becoming; there is only stasis in a runaway system of capitalized exchange. And for there to be alterity, there must be an unknown that is accepted and interacted with. This is what is at stake in Societies of Discipline and Societies of Control, for the mutation of subjective processes is always what has provoked power’s offensive. “A certain type of worker during

the Paris Commune became such a 'mutant' that the bourgeoisie had no choice but to exterminate him. They liquidated the Paris Commune just as they did, in a different time, the Protestants on Saint Bartholomew's.^{xviii} The heretics are always eliminated.

McKenzie Wark plugs straight into the underground stream of heresy with his invocation of the Furies – "a pack of beasts," a "flock of indefinable number," an "incontinence of form."^{xix} A swarm forever in a state of becoming, they persist as a negative, always screaming "never!" in the face of power's apparatuses. Most importantly for us here, "the Furies can only get their due when conceived from the point of view that attempts to be inhuman itself, as can happen at the discursive extremes of science and poetry, those twin attempts to expunge the reciprocal and human point of view from communication."^{xx} Furies = Noncommunication = Unhuman = Alterity. He makes an uneasy alignment between this figure and Hardt and Negri's multitude; indeed, for just as communication requires noncommunication to exist, noncommunication enters into the realm of communication when it moves, perhaps precisely through the creation of vacuoles. Wark calls this interruption "xenocommunication"; unlike the Multitude, which is approached from the Deleuzian sense of affirmation, xenocommunication, as an ever-present borderline, can be approached through the *via negativa*, referencing the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and St. John of the Cross (not to mention Georges Bataille) that straddles its own borders between orthodoxy and heresy.

"When I first came across the word 'dada,'" [Hugo] Ball wrote on 18 June 1921, "I was called upon twice by Dionysius.... It was a mystical code, 'D.A.-D.A.'" – a doubling, John Elderfield writes in his introduction to Flight Out of Time, "of the initials of Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the three saints who were to form the subject of [Ball's 1923] book Byzantinisches Christentum...."^{xxi}

When speaking of Dada's birth, Ball recounts a communication with an absolute otherness embodied, in his almost certainly fictional tale, by one of the most known of the *via negativa*; Dada, the great noise against bourgeois society and state, war, capitalism, psychoanalysis, the whole edifice of modernity, appears almost as channeling. Wark describes xenocommunication as a portal between two things: "The portal between unconsciousness and subject is controlled by psychoanalysis. The portal between subject and object is controlled by phenomenology. The portal between object and object is that which object-oriented ontology... would like to control."^{xxii} Xenocommunication is then something that, under the gaze of power, becomes subject to regulation. It thus governed, in the network topology of the current abstract machine, by protocols and becomes the sight of an immense struggle. To deregulate xenocommunication is a noisy act, as it disrupts the priorities of a given communication channel. It becomes not so much a state to aspire to, but a tactical weapon to be wielded. Deleuze at least sensed this, in his dialogue with Negri: "Computer piracy and viruses, for example, will replace strikes and what the nineteenth century called 'sabotage' ('clogging' the machinery)."^{xxiii} In the network age, piracy and contagions need not be relegated to the computer alone, for the computer itself is both a universal metaphor (from the human brain to the cosmological system) and an engine for power's new forms of organization.

It is the writings of Jacques Attali that four stages of musical development are laid out: sacrifice, representation, repetition. Each can be further correlated to the four Foucauldian/Deleuzian stages of society: pre-sovereign or tribal, sovereign, disciplinary, and control.^{xxiv} In this genealogy, music is born as a sublimation of the violence of ritual sacrifice, which noise represents and serves as a stand-in for the pre-earthly divine fog. "Before the world there was Chaos, the void and background noise."^{xxv} Music is then prayer, a portal to this realm that is also an affair of power in that monopolizes the capacity for violence, regulating it while providing security against it. We know from Bataille, operating in the formless contours of the *via negativa*, that transgressions like sacrifice are communications and limit experiences that explode mediation; and yet it is in sacrifice that the earliest forms of exchange economies are found, in the trading this for that. Music, like the religion that has supported so much in the development of capitalism, has assisted in detaching this absolute transgression from communication in order for its evolution and continuation.

Attali's final stage, composition, is by far the most perplexing. It is "beyond exchange" "noncommercial," and operates "as something fundamentally outside all communication." This is an anticipation of revolutionary modes against the Control society, speaking like Deleuze of noncommunication against the onslaught of power-laden hypercommunication. Like Vaneigem's aspirations, composition is ludic, playful; it is akin to Wark's Furies in that it "proposes a radical social model, one in which the body is treated as capable not only of production and consumption, and even of entering into relations with others, but also of autonomous pleasure."^{xxvi} Like the schizophrenics of *Anti-Oedipus*, it is "nourished on the death of codes."^{xxvii}

Hear me well: composition is not the same as material abundance, that petit-bourgeois vision of atrophied communism having no other goal than the extension of the bourgeois spectacle to all of the proletariat. It is the individual's conquest of his own body and potentials. It is impossible without material abundance and a certain technological level, but is not reducible to that.^{xxviii}

iAndreas Burckhardt *A Sanctuary of Sounds* Punctum Press, 2013

iiFT. Marinetti "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" *Le Figaro*, February 20th, 1909 <http://www.italianfuturism.org/manifestos/foundingmanifesto/>

- iiiHugo Ball, quoted in Greil Marcus *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* Harvard University Press, 1990, pg. 204
- ivGeert Lovink interview with Kodwo Eshun "Everything was to be done. All the adventures are still there." *Telepolis* October 7th, 2000 <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/6/6902/1.html>
- vMarcus *Lipstick Traces* pg. 217
- viGilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Penguin Classics, 2009 (reprint edition) pg. 335
- viiSteve Goodman *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* MIT Press, 2012, pg. 198
- viiiMcKenzie Wark "Furious Media" in Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark *Excommunication: Three Inquiries into Media and Mediation* University of Chicago Press, 2014, pgs. 160-161
- ix"Gilles Deleuze in Conversation with Antonio Negri" *Futur Anterieur* Spring, 1990 <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze3.htm>
- xDeleuze, Guattari *Anti-Oedipus* pg. 28
- xilbid, pg. 26
- xiiNick Land "Machinic Desire" *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007* Urbanomic, 2013, pg. 326
- xiiiSee also Andrew Culp's (*Anarchist Without Content*) "Dark Deleuze" project, notes on which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- xivOlivier Grau *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* MIT Press, 2004, pg. 280
- xvIbid, pg. 284
- xviHenri Lefebvre *The Critique of Everyday Life, Volume I* Verso, 1991 (reprint edition) pg. 117
- xviiThe Red Army Faction "The Black September Action in Munich: Regarding the Strategy for Anti-Imperialist Struggle" November, 1972 http://www.germanguerrilla.com/red-army-faction/documents/72_11.php
- xviii Felix Guattari and Francois Tosquelles *Pratiques de l'institutionnel et politique* Matrice editions, 1985, pg. 53; cited in Maurizio Lazzarato *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* Semiotext(e), 2014, pg. 15
- xixWark "Furious Media" *Excommunication*, pg. 156
- xxIbid, pg. 157
- xxiMarcus *Lipstick Traces* pgs. 207-208
- xxiiWark "Furious Media" *Excommunication*
- xxiii"Gilles Deleuze in Conservation with Antonio Negri"
- xxivGoodman *Sonic Warfare* pgs. 51-52
- xxv Jacques Attali *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* University of Minnesota Press, 1985 pg. 28
- xxvi Ibid, pg. 33
- xxvii Ibid, pg. 36
- xxviii Ibid, pg. 135
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